

EDITORIALS

THE ISSUE: EVILS OF POLYGAMY

Trapped in a cult

Carolyn Jessop's book is called *Escape*. If you wonder whether the title is justified, just read her story on the front of today's Viewpoints.

The psychological chains, emotional isolation, financial need and bone-chilling fear she talks about are familiar themes to those who help victims of domestic violence.

Add the belief that your eternal salvation depends on enduring a life so brutal that mothers cannot kiss their children and you get an idea of what it's like to live in the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. One observer called it "a quasi-religious harem for a few select old men." We call it a cult.

Its leader Warren Jeffs was convicted in a Utah court as an accomplice to the rape of a 14-year-old girl. He will stand trial in Arizona this summer on similar charges.

Jessop's remarkable story of escaping the cult with her children offers a jaw-dropping look into the world Jeffs created. That world has been in the news a lot lately.

Following a dramatic raid on the cult's Texas compound, some have tried to portray polygamy as a legitimate lifestyle choice. They say the government should butt out because women choose to stay.

But victims of domestic violence often cannot "just leave." There is no easy exit for women trapped in polygamous cults, particularly if they want to save their children.

A society built on respect for human liberty — our society — has a responsibility to prosecute criminal activity by cults and to help the victims.

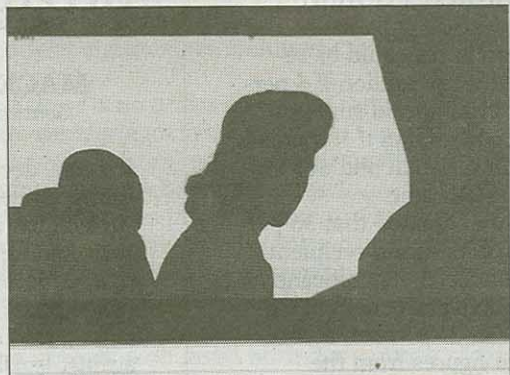
Jessop tells how the cult uses physical abuse and mind-control even on small children. Girls are raised to be child brides.

This is no lifestyle choice by consenting adults. This is bondage. It should not be tolerated. Yet an estimated 37,000 people live in polygamy across the intermountain West because it has been tolerated.

Jeffs' cult festered along Arizona's border with Utah for decades until Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard and Utah Attorney General Mark Shurtleff began methodically moving against it a few years ago.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid recently criticized Goddard and Shurtleff for not pursuing a Texas-style raid.

He was wrong. Goddard and Shurtleff



TONY GUTIERREZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Women in the polygamist cult deserve the government's help in rebuilding their lives.

have done a great deal to undermine the cult's activities in Arizona and Utah.

Yet prosecuting polygamy is tricky. In Arizona, the kind of "spiritual" plural marriage practiced by the cult is not illegal under the bigamy statute. Prosecutors have to target church-sanctioned unions with underage girls. Even these cases are hard to win unless victims testify.

Jessop's story suggests that fears for children left behind can make young mothers mute. Terrorized child brides lie for the cult.

In fact, Texas may find the high drama of its raid ends with a whimper. Ken Driggs, attorney and expert on Jeffs' cult, told the Associated Press that prosecutions would be difficult because of jurisdictional problems, the vagueness of the law and the historic reluctance of victims to cooperate.

Cracking these cults requires the kind of dogged persistence Goddard and Shurtleff have shown. These two AGs seized on Reid's criticism and turned it around. They asked for federal assistance in fighting polygamy-related crimes.

Reid responded with a letter last week to say he's reviewing the request for federal funding. He also said a federal prosecutor has been assigned to help the states.

If Goddard and Shurtleff shamed the feds into getting more involved, that's a victory worth celebrating.

Women like Jessop deserve the government's help to rebuild their lives and keep their children from becoming the next generation of victims. Their victimizers deserve to face justice in court.